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Shultz After the Retreat

By David Ignatius

WASHINGTON—In a reception room outside George Shultz's office, there is a painting that shows a cowboy adjusting his gear on the edge of an icy mountain pass. The title of the painting is "A Slipping Pack on a Slippery Trail."

The secretary of state finds himself these days in nearly the same precarious position as the cowboy in the painting. An important part of American foreign policy has come loose in Lebanon, and Mr. Shultz is struggling to contain the damage and prevent the whole train of baggage from falling off the cliff.

It's an unusual situation for Mr. Shultz. At age 63, he is a man who is accustomed to success. For three Republican administrations he has been a kind of Mr. Fixit—"reliable ol' George"—who solved in the same calm and deliberate way whatever problems were thrown at him. Then came Lebanon, and several of Mr. Shultz's friends say it is the first real failure of his life.

Mr. Shultz's critics argue that his own mistakes created the Lebanon debacle. They contend that on Lebanon, his normal virtues became liabilities: His caution led him to avoid a diplomatic opening toward Syria in late 1982 or early 1983, when it might have made a difference, and by the time he was ready to negotiate it was too late; his trust in subordinates led him not to question adequately advice he was receiving early last year about Syria from his special Mideast negotiator, Philip Habib; his steadfastness made him stick with a failing policy during the last six months, when changes might have reduced the cost to America; and his toughness led him to advocate what critics believe was excessive use of military force during the last few weeks, in an effort to stave off defeat.

Mr. Shultz has a simple answer for his critics: He has tried his best to make something good happen in Lebanon, despite enormous obstacles. He explains: "I've been giving it all I've got. . . . If you never try anything unless you are absolutely sure, you're not going to do a very good job, because the world is full of risks. And I think that one of the great characteristics of America is its willingness to try to make things better, not only for ourselves but for the world more generally."

Mr. Shultz seemed as unflappable as ever when he made these comments in an interview with The Wall Street Journal on Monday. Looking tanned and fit after a brief holiday in the Caribbean, he outlined what he sees as the lessons of Lebanon for American foreign policy.

What seems to worry Mr. Shultz most is the possibility that Lebanon will reinforce perceptions around the world that the U.S., a decade after Vietnam, still has difficulty using military power successfully. One close friend explains: "The point on which he is most concerned is: Can the U.S. apply limited force in an ambiguous situation over a sustained period?"

Mr. Shultz concedes that Lebanon will have some impact on perceptions of U.S. strength. "The Lebanon experience to date is not a helpful one," he says. But he contends that fears about America's resolve reflect a "misfire of analysis," as Lebanon wasn't a real test of American military power. "We did not make a decision to employ American military power to rearrange Lebanon," he says. "We employed a very small amount of American military resources on the ground in Lebanon . . . [and] their mission was not the sort of thing where you could say that the military part of it failed or didn't fail."

The second worry for Mr. Shultz is that Lebanon may represent a victory for what he calls "state-sponsored terrorism." After the withdrawal of the Marines, he says, "the cruel fact of the matter is that terrorism works. We can't have terrorism work; it's got to not work. And we have to arrange things so that it is a tactic that we are able to frustrate."

Mr. Shultz argues that the U.S. has to develop tougher intelligence and military tactics to deal with terrorism, including the capability to retaliate quickly. He says that the U.S. "wanted to" retaliate against those responsible for the Oct. 23 bombing of Marine headquarters in Beirut.

"We had the capacity to take out installations, and we felt we had a pretty good idea very quickly about who was responsible," he explains. But he says quick punishment of the likely culprits was hindered by the administration's desire for hard evidence that would "stand up in court." He argues: "That isn't a test that you can apply if you say that you're going to have rapid retaliation. . . . There is going to be ambiguity, and we have to have some kind of way of dealing with that ambiguity."

Mr. Shultz says he hasn't decided yet exactly what the U.S. should do to deter terrorism, and that he is just "raising the question." He offers this example: "Suppose our intelligence shows us, 'Here's a truck, and the truck is coming roaring down this road aimed at some United States facility.' Is our rule of law such that we have to wait until it blows up the facility before we do anything about it? I think the answer to that must be . . . 'No, we will stop that truck.' "

The third post-Lebanon worry for Mr. Shultz is the role of Congress and the public in foreign policy. He says that in both Lebanon and Central America, "our first problem is to convince ourselves of what we need to do—'ourselves' meaning the body politic here in the United States." But Mr. Shultz doesn't have any new ideas for dealing with this old problem.

In his own public presence, Mr. Shultz does try to minimize discord and promote unity within the administration—something his predecessors didn't always do. For example, he doesn't discuss publicly what friends say were quarrels within the administration over Lebanon policy, particularly between him and Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger.

Administration sources say the dispute with Mr. Weinberger goes back at least six months, when the Marines began taking heavy casualties and Mr. Weinberger began arguing that they should be withdrawn to ships off the Lebanese coast. Mr. Shultz, an ex-Marine himself, argued that they should stay in Beirut to fulfill their mission. Sources say that after the Oct. 23 bombing, an angry Mr. Shultz was among the strongest advocates of retaliation. "He argued that you didn't need to nail down the evidence," one official recalls.

This peculiar debate—in which the secretary of state argued for military force, and the secretary of defense argued for diplomacy—continued until early last month, when Mr. Weinberger finally prevailed and President Reagan decided to withdraw the Marines. Sources say that Mr. Shultz was furious, but he has carefully kept that anger from public view.

Whatever Mr. Shultz's responsibility for the American failure in Lebanon, he is probably the perfect person to contain the damage. He is a good soldier who genuinely believes that his first reponsibility is to serve his president and his country.

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